



## People in the News

### Bryn Geffert

Bryn Geffert has been making the headlines recently as the brains behind the new Amherst College Press, an open access (OA) publishing venture that was launched a year ago.

It is a brave man who decides to start a new university press in the current economic climate, so your Editor began by asking Bryn what the main driver was in deciding to set up the new press. "My library's conviction that academic publishing hews to a broken and fundamentally perverse model" he replied, before continuing, "It is absurd for the academy to pay scholars to conduct research and produce manuscripts from that research, then to give away those manuscripts to for-profit publishers without compensation, and then to *buy them back* as books and journal subscriptions at exorbitant rates. No matter how wealthy an institution and how flush its library budget, there is no sensible reason to give away products and then buy them back." He went on to explain that he feels that "... the system does far more to lock up information – to restrict scholarship to the well off – than it does to disseminate information. We work within a model that is bankrupting libraries and preventing most of the world's populace from obtaining scholarship."

"... academic publishing hews to a broken and fundamentally perverse model."

Picking up on his point about the current publishing model being 'broken', your Editor asked Bryn if he could elaborate a little. He responded, "Any business executive worth his/her salt would deem a business model to be broken if that model required his/her company to give its products away without compensation and then to purchase them back. I also submit that an academic publishing model is broken if it makes information available only to those with deep pockets. A working model will make good scholarship available to everybody who needs it."

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Despite concerns about the current model, Bryn has been quoted as saying that setting up the press was still a 'leap of faith'. When asked whether he is getting any sense yet of that faith being vindicated, he replied, "The first sign of vindication was the strong pool of applicants for the director position. Many good people sought to join this venture. We were fortunate to land our first choice, Mark Edington<sup>1</sup>." Bryn was keen to stress that "... true vindication, however, will not emerge until we attract good manuscripts. This is our chief challenge. Can a new, untested endeavor attract quality work? Will good scholars trust the Amherst College Press with their professional reputations?"

4 Having previously been Library Director at West Point before moving to Amherst, what was it about Amherst that made Bryn think it was the right place to start a new academic press? "Amherst's motto is 'Terras Irradiant' or 'Light to the World'. What a perfect motto for open access publishing!" he said, before going on to explain that, "Amherst's past president and current president, Tony Marx and Biddy Martin, believe passionately in making education available to traditionally underserved populations. More than 50% of Amherst's students are students of color and students from outside the United States, with 22% of Amherst students coming from economic backgrounds that qualify them for Pell Grants (federal aid to low-income students)."

"Amherst's motto is ... 'Light to the World'. What a perfect motto for open access publishing!"

"Amherst's commitment to making high-quality education available to underserved populations fits nicely with the library's drive to make scholarship available to traditionally underserved populations. Amherst believes that income should not serve as an impediment to learning. Amherst also believes in the traditional humanities and the continued relevance of the liberal arts. Knowing that the humanities are in crisis, Amherst wants to help ensure the long-term viability of literature in the humanities."

It is clear that launching the Press was a happy intersection of both a personal goal and a strategic move by the institution, but it allows the library at Amherst to take an active role within the institution. Bryn noted, "Libraries and presses share a common mission: making good literature available to the largest possible audience ...", but, he added ruefully, "... instead of working together to fulfill this mission, they fight with each other. Academic presses are suing academic libraries (see Cambridge University Press v. Becker)", a situation that he believes is 'preposterous'. "Libraries gripe and grouse about publishing practices without proposing solutions." This is equally unproductive. "We must find a way to align the work of libraries and presses. If libraries cannot countenance current publishing practices, they must offer a compelling alternative. Librarians at Amherst would rather seek solutions than complain."

The Press will have just three staff members: a director and two editors. Bryn added that "The library has contributed two salary lines (lines freed through retirements) to hire the two editors. In return, our president has charged our advancement office with raising an endowment to fund the director's salary." These three staff members will handle acquisitions and developmental editing, and an existing library endowment will pay freelancers to do copy-editing. In a gesture of support from the institution, Amherst's IT office has agreed to help identify and mount a publishing platform and a designer in Amherst's public affairs office has offered to assist with design work.

When asked about how the Press will interface with an institutional repository (IR), Bryn replied, "We are building an IR. The Amherst faculty passed an OA resolution last spring, and the library and IT have committed to building the infrastructure to archive and disseminate faculty work. I don't expect the IR and the Press to 'interface': the IR will be a home for work that Amherst faculty publish with other presses."

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So, at a time when open access is in a state of flux, with many institutions and publishers struggling to find a clear way forward, your Editor was keen to find out whether this resolution was what made Bryn decide that OA was the way forward for the press. "If one believes that good literature deserves the widest possible audience, then I don't see how one can embrace a model other than the OA model. We never 'decided' that OA was the way forward; OA was a given from the start." Furthermore, he added, "The long-term benefit is obvious to us: the potential audience for any given print book is a few million people (or a few hundred thousand for academic books, which now sell, on average, only 200 copies); the potential audience for our work, however, will be everybody with an internet connection, roughly 2.4 billion people. Of course, only some tiny fraction of this potential audience will ever read our work. But no person will be denied our work because s/he cannot afford to purchase it or because s/he does not live near a library that purchased it."



Bryn spreading the word via a TEDx Talk and a New England public radio station broadcast

Talking about his aims for the Press, Bryn said, “We hope the Amherst College Press will attract four types of authors: technophiles, eager to produce work that cannot be produced in print; mid-career and late-career faculty who do not have a tenure decision riding on their next publication, and who are thus willing to take a risk with a new publisher; idealists committed to open access; and authors who are not satisfied with an artificially circumscribed audience, i.e. who want a potential audience larger than that of faculty and students living in the shadows of the 200 academic libraries that purchase their books.”

Following Amherst’s original press release, some expressed concerns about the Press focusing on the humanities, which traditionally have been less responsive to online publishing. Despite this, Bryn continues to be optimistic. “Certainly the humanities have been much less receptive than other disciplines (particularly STEM disciplines) to online publishing. Ithaka’s triennial faculty surveys bear this out<sup>2</sup>.” But, he continued, “These same surveys also indicate that humanists are becoming more receptive to online publishing, albeit at a slower pace than their counterparts in other disciplines. We believe this trend will continue. In fact it has to continue, because the economics of publishing – already dismal in the humanities – cannot continue to support the expense of publishing in print. A new generation of humanists will also drive the trend toward online publishing – humanists who want to use audio, video, data sets and interactive features will have no choice but to work in an online environment. We’re fortunate to launch this venture at a time when interest in the digital humanities is exploding.”

Bryn is quite relaxed about the fact that the Press has not yet published a book, and plans to build the business slowly. “Fortunately we’ll have Mark Edington [the new director] on board in January [2014]. It’s high time to have somebody running the show who actually knows what he’s doing,” he said lightly. “We’ll be happy if we have a small list of publications within two years. But we are ... committed to peer review and quality control. Editors will identify experts to evaluate promising manuscripts, recommend whether they merit publication, and, if so, which revisions should precede publication. The Press will expect its editors to *edit*: not to treat manuscripts as nearly finished products, but rather as raw material from which better products can emerge. We expect editors to evaluate arguments, question structure, demand clarifications, call for trims, and message prose.”

“Never underestimate the power of idealism.”

And so, a year after the original announcement of the launch of the Press, Bryn feels that they have already learned valuable lessons. “Never underestimate the power of idealism. Librarians are, by nature, idealists. And alumni love to see their alma maters pursuing idealistic ventures,” he said, before adding, “I’ve travelled around the country to speak with alumni groups and it would be difficult to overstate how excited they

6 become to see their institution doing something altruistic. Idealism and conviction create the support necessary to do difficult things.”

Idealism and conviction aside, your Editor asked Bryn how he manages to switch off from the time-consuming work on the Press. “For relaxation I like to run; I try to do the Boston Marathon every year. I’ve also officiated high school basketball for many years. Writing, too, is a good way to relax.”

And so, on that note, your Editor thanked Bryn for his time and brought the interview to a close.

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#### References

1. [https://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/news/news\\_releases/2013/12-2013/node/522697](https://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/news/news_releases/2013/12-2013/node/522697) (accessed 2 January 2014).
2. <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/research-publications/us-faculty-survey-2012> (accessed 2 January 2014).

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